

[Excerpted from Bart's upcoming book,
Becoming Vulnerable to Grace: Strategies for Self-Realization]

Flight 99

Rose's greatest desire in life was to pass on what he had found to someone else, to facilitate Self-Realization in one or more of his students. He used to say, "If I can keep five lemmings from going over the cliff, and each of them can keep five from going over, my life will have been worth it, and the world might be benefitted."

But in over 30 years of active teaching and running spiritual groups none of his students ever woke up. Several years after he was out of it with Alzheimer's, though, unable to speak, living in a state-run dementia facility, things started happening for some of his former students, and happening fast.

The first to pop was my friend Bob, who was one of Rose's early students, and had been with him since he was nineteen. Bob was one of the guys in a small spiritual group we had in Raleigh. There were only four or five of us, mostly ex-Rose students, who started meeting for dinner occasionally, then decided to be more regular about it and meet at Bob's house once a week.

Our pattern was to rotate who led the meeting, and when it was your turn you'd prepare something. One week when it was to be my turn, Bob called the night before and said, "Can I take the meeting this week. There's something I need to talk about."

His voice sounded a bit shaky so I didn't press him for details. "Sure," I said. "See you then."

At the meeting he told us he'd had a transformative spiritual experience triggered by a passage he was reading in some letters from Alfred Pulyan to Rose, which had been compiled and were being passed around by TAT members. It was obvious then as he spoke, and in subsequent weeks as his Realization matured in him, that this was the real deal.

Bob's Realization had a powerful effect on me. The most immediate was, "Holy shit, this really *can* happen to ordinary people. This gun I'm playing with is loaded!"

One of the things I loved about Rose as a teacher was that he was such a regular guy, not some swami on a throne. But on another level, he really wasn't so regular. He had capacities and strengths I did not attribute to myself, and while knowing him made enlightenment seem more possible than if my only models were Jesus and Buddha, I still did not put myself in his league.

But Bob? Bob I'd known for years and knew to be a truly ordinary guy. On some level I might even have thought I was "ahead" of him on the path. Which brings me to my second reaction: "Why him and not me? What's wrong with me? What am I doing wrong?" Bob's experience both gave me hope and threw me for a loop.

Three months later, another friend named Bob popped. Three months after that, Shawn. What the fuck is going on here? I was both happy for them and depressed that in this frenzy of enlightenment goodies being handed out, I was being passed over by the Divine. What am I, chopped liver? I doubled-downed on my spiritual efforts and prayed it might soon be my "turn."

Several years passed and nothing else happened. Nobody else got enlightened, and certainly not me. I thought, "Well, those three guys were all younger than me. Maybe I've aged out of it." By then I was 58.

In the early days of his teaching, Rose said that if enlightenment hadn't happened by age 30, hang up your spurs. Later, as all his students turned 30 and beyond, he amended that dictum to age 40. But he never upped it from there. He also spoke about enlightenment in terms of extreme trauma, saying things like, "They're gong to have to carry you out on a stretcher," and, "You're going to walk through death and that takes some vitality."

I was 44 when I first met Rose, so I started off fighting the odds, and now, at age 58 I was at a crossroads. Give up

completely, or make a Quixotic last assault. I opted for the later, and in order to demonstrate the sincerity of my desire, I did things like get my papers in order and destroy old writings I would not want others to see, as gestures saying, "I am prepared to die for this."

Then my friend Art, another long-time Rose student from the early days, had a conclusive spiritual experience. And Art was two years older than I was!

Art had been reading *The Little Book of Life and Death*, by Douglas Harding on an isolation retreat when his experience kicked in, and coincidentally I'd recently gotten an email announcing Harding's annual Gathering in England to be held that August. I knew Douglas' work and admired him as a teacher. I didn't really have the money for that kind of trip, but the idea of working with him was too compelling to resist.

As the first day of the Gathering unfolded I was immediately disappointed. Looking around I judged my fellow attendees to be New Age lightweights. Before the meeting got started one woman announced to the room she'd appreciate it if no one wore perfume, as the smell disturbed her energy vibrations. A bearded American man wearing Indian white linen loudly announced that he'd be doing yoga on the lawn at the end of the day and encouraged everyone to join him.

When the meeting got underway, Douglas, 95 years of age, sat in a wheelchair with his head drooped as members of his organization gave talks that were unimpressive. It seemed Harding at his advanced age was just a figurehead now, a marquee name that attracted people to an event that featured other speakers. I felt I'd foolishly spent money I didn't have to be trapped with people who were not as serious as I was, who did not have the spiritual background I did, who were my spiritual "inferiors."

When the current speaker finished up, she turned to Harding. "Douglas, would you like to say anything?"

Harding lifted his head and in a booming voice said, "Why, yes I would!"

From then on it was his meeting, and every day after for the four-day Gathering. We did his "experiments," drew self-portraits of our headless world view, and listened in rapt attention as he held us in thrall with profound teachings delivered in glorious Shakespearean tones. On top of that, over the course of the Gathering I literally fell in love with everyone there for being exactly who they were, to the point of feeling constantly on the verge of tears.

When the last day ended everyone said goodbye to Douglas and his remarkable wife Catherine, a beautiful French woman in her 80s who seemed to embody every aspect of the feminine at once: mother, lover, sister, muse... Most everyone was headed to the airport that day, but my flight was not until morning so I waited until everyone had dispersed to say goodbye to Douglas.

Harding was an incredibly kind and loving man, and when we'd first met a few days earlier, he treated me like an old friend he'd known for fifty years, as I'm sure he did everyone. It was with that kind of warmth we said goodbye to each other. Then suddenly, without warning, his arm shot straight up in the air, his eyes flared, and he shouted, "Simplify!"

I was so shocked I probably took an involuntary step back. I was too stunned to speak. My mind went blank. Harding's eyes stayed fixed on mine. His arm remained in the air, index finger pointing to heaven... I turned and staggered to my room.

Once there I sat in a small wooden chair and stared at the floor without thinking. I don't know how long I stayed that way. Then without warning my chest heaved and the dam burst on a gut-wrenching crying jag that would not let up. It was like a plug had been pulled and everything was pouring out, a painful retching of tears and emotion I could not stop or control.

When it was over I couldn't move. The floor between my feet was soaking wet. In the stillness I knew without a shadow of a doubt I would never be enlightened. My search was over.

It had ended without reaching the goal. A great lightness came over me, a joy I had never known. My burden had been lifted. With all my heart I thanked God for all the gifts I'd been given and apologized for always wanting more. It was done. I was now as I'd always be and that was that.

In those days I was in the habit of carrying a small notebook in my pocket. That night in bed I wrote:

Stop looking and See. Stop searching and Be. There is only this view, here, now – nothing else. What is there to look for or find? What else is needed? What is it you think you want? There will never be a time there is more than this. Recognizing This as All ends the search.

I turned out the light. The next morning was glorious. Salisbury Cathedral shone gold as I waited for my taxi. The driver was so friendly he continued our conversation long after I'd paid the fare. On the train I had no sense of time, of duration. Every so often I'd wonder if I'd missed my station—even though I knew I'd not slept or even closed my eyes. Everything was poignant, moving. I made one note:

Young girl with pink hood sleeps with her head against the window, a strand of hair across her face. Pushing a cart up the aisle the refreshment lady says to passengers, "Sorry, my love. Thank you, my love." My love... My love... An unshakable quiet overtakes me.

I arrived early at the airport and enjoyed watching people, catching bits of overheard conversation. There was no sense of waiting. I was conscious of seeing with the "single eye" that Harding—and Jesus—spoke about, but nothing about that seemed remarkable. Everything was just *as it is*.

United Flight 99 from London to Philadelphia was over half empty and no one sat near me or even in my view. I looked forward to the solitude. I took out Harding's *The Science of the 1st Person* and opened it. Reading failed to happen. The marks on the page produced no meaning. Out the window, magnificent cloud formations appeared. I searched for my

questions and doubts. I couldn't find them. I was convinced I could live from here without further certainty. I made this note:

The next step, if there is one, is learning to trust it, this seeing of the single eye. The eye of the one living thing. The eye of the One. Live it.

At some point after that note, something happened. The first of what was to be a series of occurrences took place. I can't say what it was. I didn't seem to be present for it, yet there was no interruption of bodily awareness as far as I know—no break in the visual stream reporting my surroundings, for instance. I just disappeared without going anywhere. Coming out of it I discovered I was weeping. A great quiet followed.

This pattern repeated maybe six or eight times for the duration of the flight. Something would happen that did not register on the mind, then the body would weep, then thoughts and words would come—some of which I wrote down—then utter quiet and calm.

It was not fragile. During the quiet periods I would get up to go to the bathroom, look around the plane at people. The stewardess would bring coffee. I'd take pictures of clouds and the birth of icebergs from Greenland glaciers. Each time I'd think it was over, then without warning I'd disappear again, then weep, and the pattern would repeat. Between episodes I took the following notes:

What's different now? I trust It. I trust it absolutely. This in no way bestows a mantle of enlightenment--in NO WAY. I am in no way different. Only now I know where I am. I am the stillpoint of Now at the center of the universe, the portal through which Nothing becomes Everything. This is happening here, now, where I sit – at the moment, in the seat of an airplane.

I am filled by the world. Literally.

I have been dealt with gently. No agony of death, no pain of realization. I've been overwhelmed with gifts and blessings until I

crumble to dust under the weight of them. How can I deserve this? How can anyone? There is no way. NO WAY to learn enough, to become a good enough person, an earnest enough seeker to deserve this. It is a gift you cannot earn or ever deserve--and yet it is given.

I can't stop crying. Wave upon wave. What about Bart? Is he gone? Such quiet. Even these few thoughts are thin and distant, like faint echoes of thought. Attention is not drawn to them. To be empty is complete fulfillment.

The emptiness is here, right where I am. It is not an experience of emptiness being had by a non-empty being. There is only emptiness. Why is this not terrifying? Because inexplicably and impossibly it is emptiness that weaves the world.

All the thinking about and talking about and writing about I have done has no place here. There is nothing to be said about it. There is no way to know anything about it. No explanation for it. No reason for it to be. It is. That's all that can be said.

Where is the "I" to say, "I am that I am"? IT is. I is not.

It is not vast. Everything is contained Here. But Here bends from this seat to the horizon in a flick of the Eye.

It is closer than close. It is inside itself.

I imagined the Void, the Absolute, to be a distance from me, as if it could be traveled to like a foreign country or distant star. It is nearer than near. It is in the center of my chest and it encompasses the known and unknown universe. There is nothing it does not contain. In the place you feel a heart, it is there. This is not a metaphor or an attempt at poetry. It is there, that close, all of it. There beats the pulse of Creation.

Your Eye is the only eye. This is true for everyone. How is this possible? It's not. And yet, there it is.

The Void is crystal clear. There is no distance between the seer and what is seen. No distance. None.

Nothing and Everything coexist in the same space in the same moment – Now. How can this be explained? No way. Why try? Even if it could, what's the point? The information is not good for anything. I don't even want to know how.

Nothing is the very stuff of Being. The very substance of Creation, of Everything. Nothing is what Everything is made of. This is not a metaphor. It can be witnessed.

Each time I think the crying is over, the whatever-this-is is over, a new wave hits. Between episodes it is very quiet inside. A stewardess comes by with coffee. I take pictures of clouds and the birth of icebergs.

Any understanding I thought I had is gone. Not wrong, really, and maybe even somewhat correct as far as the mind is capable. But now, This. It's not the same thing at all. No understanding is possible.

When we landed I stood and waited in the aisle to file out. The story of Buddha getting up from the Bodhi tree came to mind. It is said that after his enlightenment he got up from where he sat, walked a few feet away and looked back at where he'd been sitting. He sat back in the same spot, then got up and looked back again. He said, "This cannot be taught." I stared at the seat I had been occupying and agreed. How can you teach what cannot be grasped?

I felt shaky and disoriented, and was vaguely concerned about remembering what I was supposed to do when I got off the plane. I reminded myself about my connecting flight, and going through immigration and customs. I tried to "sober up" for what came next. I had doubts about my ability to do what people do, but was also in a state of faith and bliss. I trusted I

would be well taken care of. What followed was the worst airport experience of my life.

The Philadelphia terminal was being remodeled and was a maze of visual confusion and chaos. Everyone but me seemed to know where to go, and was in a hurry to get there. I followed the crowd to the immigration and customs area, which was jam packed. By the time I finally got through, it was time for my next flight to board, but I had no idea how to get to the gate.

I also had to get through TSA re-check first, and got hassled about my computer and camera not being out of my bag. I said something angry to the guy and got hassled even more, increasing my delay. I ended up running to my gate and got there just as they were about to close the door. By the time I settled into my seat, I was “back.”

In retrospect I imagine the Divine thinking, “We can’t let him go out into the world like this. He’s helpless. Let’s give him a good shot of adrenaline and anger to vaccinate him.” Later I remembered Rose’s story about the aftermath of his experience. He was so distraught at coming back into the world that he wanted to jump off a bridge and get back to where he’d been. But he stopped at a Catholic church first and knocked on the door, thinking a priest might be able to understand what had happened to him and help.

A fat friar answered and listened as Rose poured out his guts, then narrowed his eyes at him and said, “How long since you’ve been to confession?” Rose said, “I got so angry I wanted to kill him. But the anger pulled me out of it, and I was able to get on with life.”

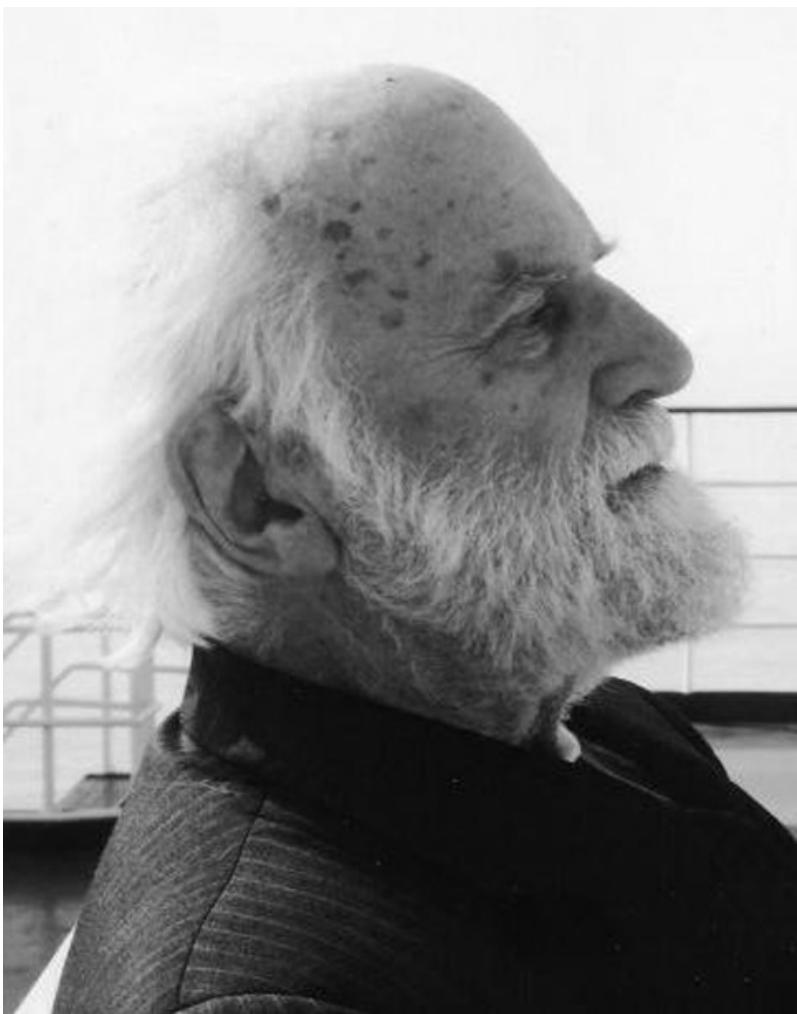
When I got home I immediately went upstairs to my attic study and stayed there several days, staring out the window. All I wanted to do was sit still and “Be.” I had an almost uncontrollable urge to head for the hills and leave everything behind – job, house, family – but I didn’t.

For about a month afterwards my experience on the plane was very much front and center. I was in a state of absolute inner freedom and bliss, and not much good for much

of anything – the honeymoon period. Then gradually the world crept back in and was slowly assimilated into my new way of being.

For about a year after that I lived in a magical state where everything went my way and bluebirds strew rose petals on the path before me. Being “enlightened” was a blast.

Then, foolishly perhaps, but who can know, I had the thought: “I wonder how enlightenment holds up when things aren’t going so great.”



Douglas Harding, 1909-2007

